

Frank Slaven Roadhouse
On the left bank of the Yukon River,
approximately 0.25 miles downriver
from Coal Creek
Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve
Circle vicinity
Alaska

HABS No. AK-42

HABS
AK,
23-CIRC.V,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
U. S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

FRANK SLAVEN ROADHOUSE

HABS No. AK-42

Location: Left bank of the Yukon River, approximately 0.2 miles downriver of Coal Creek, approximately 60 miles upriver from Circle in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, Alaska.

USGS Charley River Quadrangle, UTM Coordinates:
07.7249000.401040.

Present Owner: Not known.

Present Use: Ranger station and shelter cabin.

Significance: The Frank Slaven Roadhouse was built in about 1930 to take advantage of traffic along the Yukon River, as well as up Coal Creek, where there was an active mining district in the 1930s. Like many miners in the area, Frank Slaven had staked claims on Coal Creek as early as 1905, and continued working them and prospecting for over thirty years.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: ca. 1930. Charlie Biederman recalled that the cabin was built in 1929 or 1930 by four men, including Sandy Johnson and Art Reynolds. Reynolds' diary does not mention building this cabin in 1930 or earlier; the diaries for 1931 to 1933 are missing. On July 13, 1930, however, Reynolds wrote, "Sandy is at river going down to work for Slaven" and on July 29, "Sandy not back yet from Coal Creek." This could mean that the cabin was built in 1930 and that Art Reynolds did not participate in its construction, or that it was built in 1931.
2. Builders: According to Charlie Biederman, Sandy Johnson, Art Reynolds, Ed Brown, and Alfred Johnson helped Frank Slaven build his cabin. Sandy Johnson was recalled as the quality builder -- "a good axeman." He and Reynolds did the hewing, while the other three did the notching. All five of them put it up, "one round a day." The logs came from the Charley River.

Sandy Johnson was born in Finland in 1873 and immigrated to the U.S. in 1893 (1910 Census). He was in the Coal Creek area by 1910 and stayed until the 1940s. Other cabins built by Johnson and also showing the careful hollowing-out of the underside of each log to fit over the one underneath have been identified by Melody Webb Grauman in her inventory. They include a cabin at Ben Creek (Grauman, #116), Art Reynolds' cabin (#115), a cabin at Sam Creek (#111), and a mail trail shelter cabin (#79).

3. Original and subsequent owners: Frank Slaven built and owned the building. After he left Alaska in 1938, Gold Placers, Inc., located up Coal Creek, assumed ownership. Title to the structure is unclear.
4. Original plan and construction: From the physical evidence, it appears that the original building was a one-room two-story cabin, and that the wood frame portion to the south was an addition. Supporting this theory is the fact that the sections are constructed of different materials and that details such as the joist spacing and bridging are different. In addition, the south log wall, now covered by the addition, appears to have had some weathering, indicating that it was exposed at one time.

On the other hand, the ridge poles, purlins and butt poles extend the length of the structure and there are horizontal round logs in the south gable. Local informants do not recall the roadhouse ever having been just the log section, and no historic photographs show it thus. One possible explanation is that the log portion was constructed with a 16' deep two-story porch on the south end and that the frame portion was built to fill in this porch shortly after construction. If this is indeed the case, the original building consisted of a two-story log structure. Each round log was carefully sculpted to fit over the log underneath. At the corners, the logs were double square-notched. There may have been an entrance on the north end. The interior walls were hewn flat.

5. Alterations and additions: Local informants recall that the building seemed always to be under construction. Charlie Biederman recollected that Slaven did not finish the interior or upstairs for years, and that the building was not actually completed until Ernest Patty, who owned it after 1938, hired Frank Reynolds to finish it. Al Stout remembered the building as being habitable, but still under construction, when he visited it in the fall of 1934.

The frame portion added on the south side of the original log building is wood frame with drop siding while the interior has horizontal beaded siding. Both the drop siding and the beaded siding probably came from Fort Egbert, where buildings were being dismantled for construction of an airfield beginning in the 1920s. Nail holes in the siding clearly show that it is re-used.

The building features two roof systems, one on top of the other. The original roof was sod on top of planks, which rested on purlins. On top of that, additional purlins were laid to support rafters and corrugated tin. This second roof, which changed the pitch, was apparently added in 1935, as shown on a photograph taken that year.

Other changes include the addition and then removal of an arctic entry on the south side, which is not present in the 1935 photograph, but is illustrated in the 1938 Mertie photographs. The entry has since been removed but evidence of it is still visible on the building. On the north end of the building, a door was apparently converted to a window. Over the years, the walls of the building have sunk 1' to 2', which has caused the floors to appear to rise and which has changed the proportions of the building.

In the completed building, the south room on the first floor served as the kitchen, while the north room was the living room. On the second floor, the north room was the dormitory and the south room was partitioned, giving separate rooms for Slaven and the cook, Miss Bissell (C. Biederman, July 28, 1985).

6. Outbuildings: The current greenhouse, north of the roadhouse, may be on the site and may possibly be reusing some members of a shed that was present in 1938. The screened cache, east of the greenhouse, appears to be the cache that was also in the 1938 photograph. North of the greenhouse, just on the edge of the river bank, is a smokehouse constructed of corrugated tin. The outhouse, moved to a site east of the cabin, is covered with the drop siding popular at Fort Egbert, as is the large shed southeast of the cabin. It has a garage-type opening.

B. Historical Context:

Judge James Wickersham stayed at a roadhouse at the mouth of Coal Creek in 1901. This is definitely not the building under study, but it is cited to show the traditional use of the site. Wickersham recorded in his journal that he stayed at the Coal Creek roadhouse on February 14, and on the 15th, he noted: "50° below zero this morning and we did not leave the roadhouse until 10 A.M. A prospector here reports that he has located good bituminous coal nine miles back from the Yukon" (Wickersham, 63). Nothing further is known of this roadhouse, and it probably fell rapidly into disuse and decay.

Frank Slaven was born in Ohio in 1869 (1910 Census). He came into the country and started staking claims by 1905, at first on Colorado Creek, a tributary of Coal Creek, and then on Coal Creek. He is credited with discovering gold on Coal Creek, although never striking it rich (Knutson; Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, December 12, 1935). Between 1905 and 1927 he staked 28 claims, often in associations with others (Circle District Mining Locations 2:300, 308, 332, 3:11, 20, 82, 222, 223, 224, 274, 302, 303, 304, 360, 452, 4:37, 38, 389, 390, 5:295, 296, 297). During these years, he had a cabin, or perhaps several, up Coal Creek.

Frank Slaven played an active role in the small-scale placer mining that developed Coal Creek in the first third of the twentieth century. In 1905, the U.S. Geological Survey reported that gold mining on Woodchopper, Coal, Washington, and Fourth-of-July Creeks was expected to produce about \$30,000, and that "Most of the work ... in Coal Creek valley [has been done] on Colorado Creek, also a tributary from the east, entering about 12 miles above the mouth" (Prindle, 23). In 1914, the Mining and Scientific Press noted that "There are about twenty men at work in the district, most of them on Coal Creek," and that "George Powers and Frank Slavin have a hoisting plant and expect their season's output to be doubled over that of last year" (Hurja, 888). In 1922, Frank Slaven described a fire that destroyed his boiler house:

We was visited by a fire last night about 2 A.M. which destroyed the boiler house and its contents. As the house was built of large logs and heavily mossed, it made a fierce fire, just like a big roaring furnace and I think completely ruined the hoist and boiler and other equipment.

We had been laying off for two days as the weather was 50 below zero and we was only keeping fire enough in the boiler to keep things warm. We thought we had put it to bed for the night as safe and careful as we always do, but there must have been a spark had fallen in the moss that was unseen and smoldered along 'til after midnight before getting a start.

I happened to go out and discovered it, but it was about half hour too late by the time I got dressed so I could go out to it. It was a sheet of fire all over inside (F. Slaven to C. Ott, February 11, 1922).

Slaven never mentioned who his partner was. A few years later, Slaven expressed some wistfulness about his career:

I have uncovered more good prospects on my ground, a pay streak I did not know of before. But I am getting too old to try to take it out and I hope to sell it....Had I known 18 years back what I know now, things might have been different. But this ground will bring the money anyhow, sooner or later. (F.Slaven to C. Ott, July 15, 1924).

The U.S. Geological Survey agreed. In 1925, it was noted that "No placer-mining operations were in progress on Coal Creek," and that:

Two groups of claims in the creek are now held mainly by two men....These two groups of claims, which together comprise 7 miles of placer ground on Coal Creek, should be thoroughly prospected and if possible should be mined as a unit. This should make a good hydraulic venture for some company, for Coal Creek always has plenty of water... (Mertie, #816, 165-6).

Slaven held on for another ten years before selling out. He was a typical small-scale driftminer who made money on his workings -- never a great deal, but enough to get by. He worked in the same general area for about thirty years.

Slaven considered building at the mouth of Coal Creek as early as 1919. His idea was to form a sort of cooperative store, apparently because he felt he was being cheated by "Smith," who may have been Valentine Smith at Woodchopper Roadhouse. At any rate, Charlie Ott of Ott & Scheele discouraged him from this venture (F. Slaven to C. Ott, April 5, 1919). Slaven finally built his roadhouse after he had an argument with Jack Welch, who had taken over Woodchopper Roadhouse in 1929 or 1930. Slaven deliberately set out to compete with Welch (C. Biederman). Slaven is remembered as a short, heavy-set man who was extremely nervous, chewing his nails to the quick (C. Biederman, S. Patty). Stan Patty recalled that "he didn't know a heck of a lot about the world out there and I don't think it mattered to him that he didn't." Ernest Patty, Stan's father, called him "one of the happiest old men I have ever known...a loner," and went on to describe his affection for a pair of ravens (E. Patty, 126-128). An historian wrote that "he was not known for his generosity. He was tight. Slaven ran a roadhouse between Circle and Eagle, and for \$2 served a meal with surly reluctance. A rabbit stew at Slaven's could be expected to be stretched to the point of tastelessness with the repeated addition of water" (Wharton, 174).

For several years, Mary Bissell lived at the roadhouse. She was trained as a secretary/bookkeeper, but finally learned to cook. Art Knutson remembered her as "Mabel, the mail-order bride," a woman who refused to marry whomever she was

contracted to, but who stayed nonetheless. She had constant, bitter fights with Slaven (C. Biederman, A. Stout). She is identified in a Patty photograph and she also witnessed Slaven's lease of Coal Creek to Ernest Patty in 1934. She left in about 1937, and Slaven bought her an apartment house in Seattle, which she ran. When Slaven went outside in 1938, he apparently joined her, for on January 25, 1942, Arthur Reynolds wrote in his diary, "I wrote a letter to Slaven and Miss Bissell at Seattle."

Slaven's Roadhouse was not entirely successful as a roadhouse, being located only 6 miles away from Woodchopper Roadhouse, which was already established. Charlie Biederman, who ran the mail in the winters by dogteam from 1935 to 1938, noted that he never stopped at Slaven's, because it was too close to Woodchopper. Roadhouses should be spaced 20 to 25 miles apart to make them convenient. Nor was Slaven's a wood stop for steamboats, as it was not a good landing.

When Slaven and others sold their Coal Creek claims to a corporation in 1934, the roadhouse gained a new life as traffic up and down the creek increased. General A. D. McRae, a Canadian senator, banker and industrialist, formed a company called Gold Placers, Inc., with Ernest Patty as vice-president and general manager. Patty, who formed the School of Mines at the University of Alaska, later returned to the university to serve as its president. With the advantage of venture capital, Gold Placers, Inc., brought in a diesel tractor, a hydraulicking plant, and a dredge. The dredge arrived on several barges at the mouth of Coal Creek, and then it was hauled in to the camp 6 miles up the creek during the winter. McRae and Patty formed another company, Alluvial Gold, Inc., which started buying claims on Woodchopper Creek, where they installed a second dredge.

The impact of these operations was tremendous. By 1936 there were three diesel caterpillars, a "substantial camp" on Coal Creek, a radio station, and two dredges. An "automobile road" ran from the mouth of Coal Creek upstream for 6 miles to the site of the mining operations, and then west across the ridge into the valley of Woodchopper Creek (Mertie, #897-C, 254, 251). An airstrip was put in on Coal Creek, replacing the one on a river bar at the mouth of the creek that had been used. Patty recalled that he employed 40 men at Coal Creek and 30 at Woodchopper (E. Patty, 112).

In 1936, the post office was moved from Woodchopper to Coal Creek and Clyde A. Cobb was appointed first postmaster. With a brief interruption in 1945-46, the post office stayed there until 1961 (Ricks, 13). Although J. B. Mertie wrote very definitely that the post office was located at the mouth of Coal Creek (Mertie, #897-C, 143, 205, 254), which probably would have meant that it was in Slaven's Roadhouse, others recalled that the post office was located up at the camp.

Charlie Biederman, who delivered mail in the winter, said that it was a summer post office, and that although the steamboats left the mail at the landing, the post office itself was located up at the camp.

Slaven's Roadhouse served as a way station for those going to the mining camp. Stan Patty recalled that he and his family would come in by steamboat and spend the first night at Slaven's, before heading up the creek. Likewise, most of the freight was unloaded near Slaven's and then transported overland to the mining camp. Slaven continued to prospect in the area, even after he had sold his Coal Creek claims to Patty, but in 1938 he went outside and never returned. The roadhouse continued to serve as a way station for mining interests. Louise Paul, whose husband worked at Coal Creek from 1944 to 1952, recalled walking all the way down from the camp to do her baking at Slaven's. She also lived there, in the summer of 1950.

After the Second World War, the mining operations became increasingly less profitable, and they finally closed down in the early 1960s. Subsequent owners have made attempts at re-starting the dredge, but they have not been too successful. Slaven's Roadhouse has been looted of its artifacts over the years, but the building itself retains its integrity. It now serves as a ranger station and shelter cabin in the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.

The Frank Slaven who built this roadhouse should not be confused with Frank Slavin the former prizefighter who worked mining claims in the Klondike. Despite the similarity of the names, Frank Slaven was born in 1869 in Ohio, and Frank Slavin was born in 1861 in New South Wales (Taylor, 16; Green, 138).

PART II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

"General McRae, Mrs. Baker, Frank Slaven, Miss Bissell." Ernest Patty, photographer, ca. 1934-36. Collection of Stan Patty. Copy in collection of National Park Service, roll 1, #13.

"More general views of Frank Slaven's cabin at mouth of Coal Creek. Eagle district, Yukon region, Alaska. August 26, 1938." J. B. Mertie, Jr., photographer, #2507, 2508, U.S. Geological Survey, Denver.

"Similar views of Frank Slaven's cabin and garden at mouth of Coal Creek, Eagle District, Yukon region, Alaska. August 26, 1938." J. B. Mertie, Jr., photographer, #2493, 2394, U.S. Geological Survey, Denver.

"This house was at the mouth of Coal Creek at Yukon River, the man and wife at left were the owners and also owned the gold claim. 1935." Everett S. Hamman Collection (Acc. #85-110-01), Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Dept., University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

B. Interviews

Biederman, Charlie. Interviewed by Steve Ulvi and author, July 16, 1985. Tape in collection of Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. Follow-up interview July 28, 1985.

Juneby, Isaac. Interviewed by author, July 18, 1985.

Knutson, Arthur E. Interviewed by Leslie Taylor, August 10, 1984. Tape in collection of Yukon-Charley.

Patty, Stanton. Interviewed by David Mihalic, July 29, 1984. Tape in collection of Yukon-Charley.

Paul, Louise. Interviewed by Don Chase and author, July 20, 1985.

Stout, Al and Roberta. Interviewed by Steve Ulvi and author, July 18, 1985.

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